

# Kurds and Refugee Questions in West Asia: An Overview

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## ABSTRACT

West Asia has experienced a dramatic political crisis, migration, refugee, humanitarian crisis, and identity politics over the last two decades. Today, the unsolvable Kurdish question has resulted in interest in external and regional power interest. The Kurdish ethnicity is the largest stateless ethnic group in West Asia. The instability and problem of Kurds raise various questions in the West Asian region, particularly in Iranian, Syrian, Iraqi and Turkish territories. Ended of Ottoman Empire to 'War on terror' Kurds passes through various kinds of question in West Asia. The present study focuses on giving an overview of the Kurdish ethnic identity and refugee problem in West Asia. The ways of collection of data and information have based on secondary sources.

**KEYWORDS:** *Refugee, Ethnicity, Kurdistan, Kurdish Ethnicity, Displacement*

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## INTRODUCTION

In a mountainous region straddling the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia, between 25 and 35 million Kurds reside (T.O'Shea 2004; Demir 2017; Sheyholislami 2011; Gurses, Romano, and M.Gunter 2020; Gunes 2019). They make up the fourth most populous indigenous people in all of West Asia (Tugdar and Al 2018). There is not yet a permanent Kurdish nation or state in the West Asian regime, despite the enormous population and the fact that the Kurds are at the forefront of the fight against the Islamic State (Eppel 2016).

The penetration of External power as France, Britain and others, and the concept of nationalism not only ended the ottoman empire but also birthed new kinds of power struggle and power politics in the West Asian regime (Bromley 1994; Bajalan 2019). The demarcation of Ottoman territory by Britain and France through a secret treaty as, the "Skye-Picot Agreement" (1916), which splinted the West Asian region under two dominant power, France and Britain. After this historic treaty, the two most important treaties, as the "Treaty of Sèvres" (1920) and the "Treaty of Lausanne" (1923), put Kurds into various unsolvable questions (Gunter 2008; Van Bruinessen 2005). Still, they are facing the same

problem as recognition of the Kurdish land nation as 'Kurdistan' refugees, displacement and the number of wars and conflicts between Kurds and regional authorities (Bajalan 2019; Jawad 2008; Lortz 2005). The questions of displacement and refugee of Kurdish peoples were consequences of various historical incidents, i.e. the emergence of the European test of nationalism in West Asia, declination of the Ottoman Empire and policy interest of regional power and tough action to tackle Kurdish insurgency and Kurdish terrorist groups, i.e. PKK (by Turkish and US) action through different Kurdistan region as; Northern Kurdistan (in Turkey), Western Kurdistan (in Syria), Southern Kurdistan (in Iraq)), Eastern Kurdistan (in Syria) (Lynch and Seligman 2019; Van Bruinessen 2005).

The 'Turkishness', Arabization (in Iraq and Syria) and numerous Kinds of conflicts between Kurdish versus Regional authorities as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey have marked a great implication for the displacement and refugee problem of Kurds in West Asia (L.Phillips 2015; Gunter 2008; Park 2005; 2016). In the period of Iraqi-Kurdish discord and the Ba'athist regime's concurrent Arabization programmes, which sought to clear southern

Kurdistan (or Northern Iraq) of its Kurdish majority, population displacement reached its peak (Kirmanj and Rafaat 2021; Nazdar 1980; Chatelard 2009; Ihsan 2016). Tens of thousands of Kurds were uprooted and forced to leave their homes as a result of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kurdish-Iraqi Wars in the 1960s and 1970s. The 1980s War Between Iraq and Iran (O'Ballance and O'Ballance 1996). In the early 1990s, the first Gulf War and subsequent rebellions displaced several million Kurds, the majority of whom sought refuge in Iran (Mayer and Tran 2022). Simultaneously, others scattered throughout the Kurdish diaspora in US and European territory. Iran one-off offered refugee to 1,400,000 Iraqi migrants, primarily Kurds, displaced by the Gulf War (1990–1991) and subsequent outbreak (Van Bruinessen 2005; G.Kreyenbroek and Stefan 1991; Robert Gurr 2017; McDowall 2021). Today, refugees, people forced to leave their homes, and their descendants make up a significant portion of the Kurdish population (Çelik 2005; Van Bruinessen 2005).

### **Kurdish ethnicity**

In the West Asian region, the Kurds are a notable indigenous peoples of the Fertile Crescent. There are significant Kurdish enclaves in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia (McDowall 2004; Meho 2001; Gurses, Romano, and M.Gunter 2020). Internal diversity in terms of regions, linguistic affiliation, tribal, and specific ethnic identity are the defining characteristic of the Kurdish population (Yavuz 1998). The today the Kurdish questions in West Asia always a center for attraction and debatable and plural concept and ideas implicated by intellectual on Kurdish problem West Asia and argued that Kurdish nationalism is a product of the 20<sup>th</sup> century power interest (Tezcür 2009; Neuberger 2014; McDowall 2004; Olson 2000; Ozoglu 2004). The culture and existence of Kurdish inhabitants as older than the current situation of Kurds and as politically active Kurdish ethnic identity could be traced from 1597 (McDowall 2004; Lalik 2017; Natali 2005; Bozarslan, Gunes, and Yadirgi 2021; Yavuz 1998). Thus, the history of Kurdish culture precedes Kurdish nationalism (Izady 2015). Kurdish is an Indo-European language, owns literature and has spoken numerous dialects and subdialects (Espeja 2009; McDowall 2021; Izady 2015). In Turkey, the most prevalent dialect spoken is 'Kirmanji' Most Sorani speakers reside in Iraq. Kirmanshahi, Gorani, and Leki are sub-dialects of Sorani. Alevi Kurds also speak Zaza in Central Anatolia (Tavadze 2019; G.Kreyenbroek and Stefan 1991).

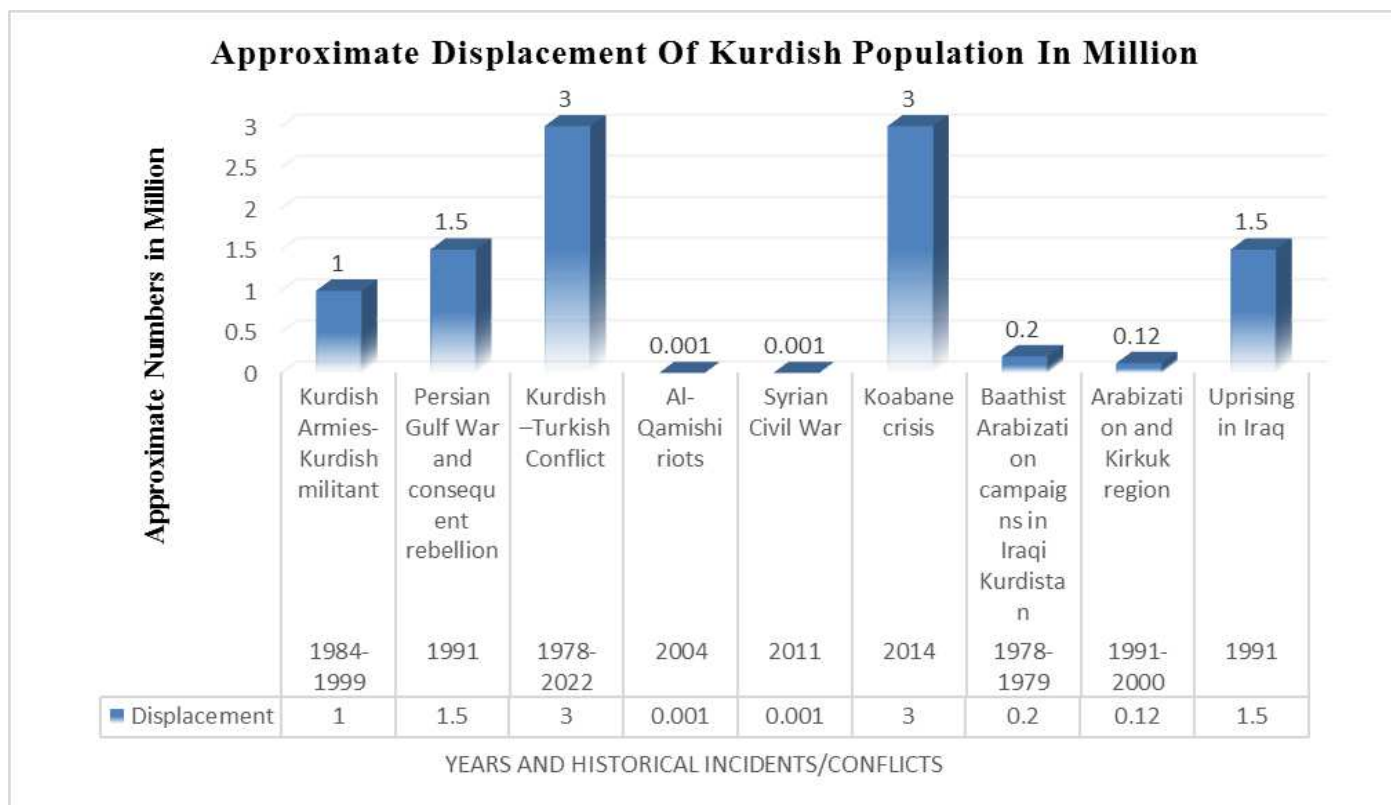
According to prominent Kurdish expertise and report of reputed agencies and organisations, and other valuable literature, commentates the approximate

population of Kurdish population as total Kurdish population was approximately 22-25 million. This population is predominantly distributed throughout four states (Culcasi 2006). 18-20 percent or 14-17million out of 77.8 million of the Turkish population ("The World Factbook" 2022), or other as calculated an approximate average population of 10-15 million of Turkish population (Gunter 1988; Bozarslan 2008; Casier and Jongerden 2011), 16-18 percent of Iraqi's population or 4.5-5.5 million in Iraq, 10 percent of Iranian population or 7-8 million for Iran, and 9.7-10 percentage of Syrian population or 1.7-2 million for Syria (Bozarslan, Gunes, and Yadirgi 2021; Gunes 2019; "The World Factbook" 2022). Diverse and conflicting loyalties exist inside the nation as a result of the country's linguistic, religious, and governmental diversity.

### **Kurdish Refugee problem**

Kurdistan, also known as "land of the Kurds," is a mountainous region that spans the borders of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia as the former Soviet republics. It is located at the frontier of empires and interchanges of civilizations (Culcasi 2006). Present maps of Kurdish ethnic inhabitant territory or Kurdistan, or the homeland of the Kurds, have been explained as an epicentre for power interest conflict of shared boundaries states and numerous questions of Kurdish ethnic politics. The shared border with the four sovereign countries, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, the Oil resource area of Northern Iraq and Northeast Syrian, and the separation of Kurdish ethnic identity with other ethnic identities such as Turkish, Arabs and Assyrian and others, these all have constructed the Kurdistan as the geographic heart of West Asia (Husain and Ahamed 2021; T.O'Shea 2004; Gunes 2019). The modern splinted boundary of Kurdish ethnic inhabitants resulted from external power and their interest. The first division of Kurdistan happened after the war between 'The Safavids' and Ottoman Empire, and next division and displacement happened after the two most historical significant historical treaty as The Treaty of Sévres and The Treaty of Lausanne, in 1920 and 1923 respectively (Sheyholislami 2011).

After these other significant incidents and various policies and action adaptations by the state national ideology as Kemal Ataturk's Turkish nationalism (Casier and Jongerden 2011), 'Turkishness' (Al 2015), Arabization in Syria and Iraq and penetration of Islamic groups organization recapture the Kurdish inhabitant area, and birth for numerous question in Kurdistan part of Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey (Bengio 2014). It has created significant results for Kurdish migration displacement and the refugee problem in Kurdistan (Figure-1).



**Figure and Table-**Explaining the approximate statistical value of Kurdish migration and displacement in various incidents/Conflicts in Kurdistan

**Source:-** Minorities at Risk Project, Chronology for Kurds in Iraq.” 2004. Refworld. 2004. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f38a6c.html>. ; Bruinessen, Martin Van. 2005. “Kurdish Society, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Refugee Problems.” In *The Kurds*, 35–61. Routledge; Bengio, Ofra. Ed. 2014. *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*. USA: University of Texas Press Austin.; “Forced Displacement and Arabization of Northern Iraq.” n.d. Accessed March 24, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/iraq0804/4.htm>.

S NO	Incident/conflict	Years	Approximate Displacement of Kurdish Population
1	Kurdish Armies-Kurdish militant	1984-99	1 million
2	Persian Gulf War and consequent rebellion	1991	1.5 million
3	Kurdish –Turkish Conflict	1978-now	3.0 million
5	Al-Qamishi riots	2004	1000 Kurds fled Syria to Iraqi Kurdistan.
6	Syrian Civil War	2011	1000
7	Koabane crisis	2014	3.0 million Syrian population, including Kurds
8	Baathist Arabization campaigns in Iraqi Kurdistan	1978-1979	200,000
9	Arabization and Kirkuk region	1991-2000	120,000
10	Uprising in Iraq	1991	1.5 million

The numbers of regional power interest and their conflict and other regional policies and project have directly question on the Kurdish refugees and displacement with and out territory of Kurdistan. The Iraqi Arabization or de-Kurdization continues in Sinjar, Kirkuk, and Khanaqin (P.Kaufmann 2004; McDowall 2004). In April of 1974, Barzani made a request to Reza Shah that he allow Kurdish refugees to seek asylum in his nation. By the end of

September, the number of refugees had reached 100,000, and by the end of December, it had reached 135,000. Another 100,000 people tried to cross the Turkish border despite the fact that it was close to them (“Minorities at Risk Project, Chronology for Kurds in Iraq,” 2004). Thus, by the end of the year, the total number of displaced individuals had reached 500,000. In addition to being a humanitarian issue, the mass exodus imposed a financial, moral, and



administrative burden on the leadership of the Kurds. Instead of focusing on military-organizational issues, the KDP was compelled to find shelter and food for refugees whose escape routes traversed KDP-controlled territory. Iran, which opened twelve refugee centres and allotted \$100 million to them, was also affected by the refugee crisis (Rajaei 2000).

Nevertheless, Iran utilised the refugees as a weapon for propaganda with the international community and as a bargaining chip with the Kurdish leadership and Baghdad. Therefore, To "persuade" them, Iran used to pressure, like arresting people at random, putting a curfew in place, and putting Kurds in different parts of Iran (Gerstein 2007). Iran also refused to let them become citizens or refugees. Because of this, most Kurds had returned to Iraq by 1976, except for about 30,000 people. On the other hand, Iraq wanted them to become prisoners in their own country (Natali 2010). 'No-Fly Zone' Proclamation, March 1991, imposed on the Kurdish region of Iraq Saddam began a crackdown on rebellious Iraqi Kurds after his troops were beaten by U.S.-led forces and forced to depart Kuwait. There is a humanitarian crisis as over a million Kurds escape to neighbouring Turkey and Iran. Hundreds of thousands more are displaced inside their own country (Gunes 2019).

These factors constituted a significant threat and prompted migration. In response, a coalition led by the United States conducts "Operation Provide Comfort" and "Operation Northern Watch," supplying humanitarian aid and enforcing a "No-fly zone" over Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate the return of the Kurds (L. Phillips 2015). No doubt the external power invasion of Iraq directly strengthening the power position to Kurdish ethnic groups but also put the Kurdish another great displacement question in Kurdish inhabitant area. The Iraqi Kurds acquire *de facto* autonomy as the central government's grip on the north erodes. The first Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and National Assembly were elected in 1992. After this the Iraqi Kurds Fight Civil War in May 1994, as a result of the 2004 Qamishli mass protest; in 2011, Assad granted some Kurds citizenship; in 2014, the rise of Islam; in 2016, the fall of ISIS Turkey intervened in Syria and in 2018, seizing a city held by Syrian Kurds (Gunter 2013; Gunes and Lowe 2015; Lesch 2019). All these conflicts affected the Kurdish displacement problem through the power interest of regional and external actors in Kurdistan.

In the aftermath of the 2004 events in 'Qamishli' 1000 of Kurds fled Syria into the Kurdish Region (KRI) of Iraq. On an abandoned military base near 'Dohuk' local authorities, the UNHCR, and other

United Nations agencies established the "Moqbeleh settlement." The Kurdish Regional Government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established the 'Domiz Refugee Camp' in semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, just over the border from Kurdish Syrian territory, after the civil crisis in Syria (Tejel 2009; Radpey 2016). The camp houses thousands of Kurds from Syria, providing them with necessities like food and medicine. In order to secure Kurdish-held areas of Syria, a neighbouring camp gives individuals the choice of undergoing military training (Galbraith 2007). As a consequence of the September 2014 Kobane crisis, Many of the Kurdish Syrians living in the Kobane province have fled to neighbouring Turkey. Approximately 300,000 Syrian refugees have entered Turkey (Ferris and Kirisci 2016; Ciordia 2018). The adaptation of policies and projects of Arabization as Arab Belt<sup>1</sup> Syrian government in Syria's Northeast From 1962-1976.

The result as, 120,000 Kurds in the Al-Hasakah Governorate of Syria lack citizenship, turning them stateless and unable to travel, according to a census. These Kurds and their descendants cannot vote, marry legally, or legally own property or businesses. The announcement of citizenship grants to 'unregistered' Kurds by President Bashar al-Assad in the midst of an intensifying uprising in Syria in April 2011 (Kerwin et al. 2020). To achieve their goal of making Arabs the majority in northern Iraq, Ba'athists carried out Arabization and ethnic cleansing campaigns against non-Arab minorities in 1978 and 1979. These minorities included primarily Kurds but also Turkmen, Yazidis, Assyrians, and Shabaks (Tejel 2009; Orhan 2016; L. Phillips 2015; Gunes and Gunes 2019; Gunes 2019). Thus, these two incidents were remarkable questions on Kurdistan's Kurdish displacement and refugee problem. As estimates as 1200,000 Kurds were deprived of their citizenship in Syria, Six hundred or more than Six hundred Kurdish villages were destroyed and approximately 200,000 to 2 million Kurds were expelled to other regions of Iraq, and most of the land replace by the new ethnic identity population as Arabs in Syria and Iraq Kurdistan inhabitant area (Tejel 2021; L. Phillips 2015; Bengio 2012).

As part of an effort to strengthen central authority in oil-producing northern Iraq or Kurdistan oil-resource area as 'Kirkuk' and others. the Baathist regime expelled and replaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds with Arabs from central and southern Iraq

<sup>1</sup> The Syrian Ba'athist government's 'Arab Belt' initiative Arabized the north of the 'Al-Hasakah' Governorate to favour Arabs over other ethnic groups, notably Kurds.

(Bengio 2012). In 1988, Iraqi Kurds revolted against the Baathist regime with the support of Iran and the United States; from February to September, Saddam carried out the “al-Anfal” (the spoils) campaign, also known as the Kurdish Genocide. This campaign used chemical weapons, killed people, and destroyed hundreds of Kurdish villages. Thousands of Iraqi Kurds have fled, and 50,000–180,000 have died (Kirmanj and Rafaat 2021). On March 16, as many as five thousand Kurds were killed in a sarin and mustard-gas attack on Halabja (Jaff 2021).

### Conclusion

In Sum, Kurds, one largest ethnic groups, do not have independent land boundaries. Still now, a great challenge for the Kurdish ethnic population. The historical happened in Kurdistan represented the migration and shifting of a place of Kurdish people and temporary settlement to their buffer to two different regional boundaries as Turkish-Syrian, or Iranian-Iraqi as refugee camps, and various Regional-Kurdish and other internal rifts. So, it has always been marked as a security threat to Kurdish identity or groups and the region. The approximate numerical data on Kurdish displacement and refugee and mass killing during different political hostilities of the state as; interstate, Intra-state always have much effect on the Kurdish ethnic existence and threat to the ideology of Kurdistness. Thus it shows that today one of the greatest problems of Kurds has been as ‘refugees’ and ‘the displacement of Kurds in Kurdistan.

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